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The Author's Chair

The Author's Chair is where the reader sits. Randy, a first-grade author, reads a page from one of his published books: *I Went Bottle Digging*. Then he turns the book to show the pictures to the class assembled on the carpet in front of him. When he finishes the book he places it on his lap, "Now."

The acceptance begins, "I liked the part where you get dirty. I liked the part where you found the pottery."

The questions follow, "What do you do with the money when you sell them?" "Why did you choose this topic?" "How do you feel about being an author?"

Each day in Randy's classroom the children take their turns reading from the Author's Chair. They read their own published books and trade books. The teacher also reads the children's published books and trade books from the same chair. Of the four situations, in only one case is the real author on the chair. But, it is always the Author's Chair.

Whether the story is about Anatole, or Jeremy's new piece on his dirt bike, the process of responding to each work is the same. First, the children receive the work by stating what they think it contains, then they ask questions of the author. When the child-author is present, the child answers the questions. For the authors of trade books, the teacher and children together speculate on answers the author might give. The prestige of the chair grows throughout the year.

The author's chair is in the first-grade classroom of Ellen Blackburn in Great Falls School, Somersworth, New Hampshire, a working-class community. The two of us interacted with the children in Ellen's classroom at least twice each week throughout 1981-82 and will continue during 1982-83. Our intent is to formulate hypotheses about the development of the children's understanding of the relation-

ship between reading and writing. We started by giving the same definition to both reading and writing: They are composing acts.

Then, because no study had ever been done with beginning writers and readers on the two composing processes simultaneously, we used case study as the principal method of investigation. We studied three children who represented low, middle, and high achievement levels. This meant biweekly data collection through video, audio, and hand recordings of the children composing and conferencing in reading and writing. Also, we asked the children questions from ten different protocol sheets. When the case study children were not composing, we gathered data on the other twenty children in the classroom. The Author's Chair became an important point to examine children's concepts of authorship as well as the relationship between reading and writing.

The Classroom

The children read and wrote every day. They lived in a community of authors who were constantly reading and writing. They viewed other children composing books, and reading the words of Freddie, Jennifer, Ezra Jack Keats, Dr. Seuss, or Holt, Rinehart and Winston. They were both audiences and writers.

They kept all their writing in their writing folders and published in hard cover about one out of every four pieces. These published books are placed on the bookshelves in the classroom library along with the published books of professional authors. Each published book has a biographical statement about the author at the end. This writing, in both its invented spelling form and published form, is the center of instruction for reading.

Most of the children's writing is done at one time of the day with reading handled at another time. But the distinction is misleading; much reading is done during the writing, or writing during the reading time. For example, one day when Charley came to the writing table to illustrate his newly typed book waiting for publication, he spontaneously reread his book before coloring. Joey, seated next to him, asked, "Will you teach me to read it?" Soon Robbie, seated on the other side of the table, got up, walked over and asked, "Will you teach me too?" When Charley finished teaching, Robbie said, "Now do you want to learn how to read mine?"

Each week a child is chosen as Author of the Week. This means the child's photo is placed on a bulletin board along with a list of the child's published book titles. The books are in pockets and other children post comments about the author's books. The author chooses his or her own published, favorite book and the teacher makes five copies for the other children to read during reading time. During this week the child reads his or her own books, basals, and/or trade books to the class.

Whenever anyone reads a trade book to the class the children are interested in the authors. When Ellen reads to the children she first gives background about the author, including other books composed. She doesn't separate the person from the work—the same procedure used for the children's own books. Soon children become known for the books they have written, for the territory they have established, and are capable of defending it under the questions of the other children.

The prestige of the Author's Chair led to satellite chairs during the reading time. Children would gather their own copies of books, readers, trade books and read to clusters of children. Reading was a time for sharing, receiving the content of the selections and asking questions of the reader. During this reading time the teacher moved about listening, questioning the work of children, working with reading tools in phonics, and meeting with groups, but above all, focusing on the meaning of what the children were doing.

Development of the Author Concept

Three phases marked the children's growing understanding of the author concept: 1) Replication, 2) Transition, and 3) Sense of Option. We will give background for changes in the author concept in light of the children's composing in both reading and writing.

Phase I: Replication Phase

"Authors Write Books"

"Authors write books," answered most of the children when asked, "What do authors do?" We asked Ellen's students this question during September 1982 as part of a series of questions about their concepts of reading and writing. We followed it with, "Well, if authors write books, how do they do that? What do they do?" The answers followed no pattern; they varied from, "I don't know," to "Make a cover, then pages in there then they typewrite it, staple it together," to "Probably print up words." The author's process is invisible to the beginning first-grade child.

Earlier in this same interview we asked, "Can you write?" All the children answered, "Yes," and showed what they meant by drawing, making numbers, writing their names, writing letters or, for a few, even writing sentences. But after each child had written and we asked, "Are you an author?" few of the children felt they were authors. They knew their own ability to write was different from that of an author.

We also asked, "Can you read?" Several of the children surprised us by answering, "Yes," and showed what they meant by telling stories as they paged through familiar books, by mixing in repetitive words as they told a story, or by reading from early basals.

The children "play" their way into an understanding of reading and writing. They both invent and imitate their way into reading and writing. They observe and interact with the other children and Ellen as they read and write. They borrow certain conventions but demonstrate their own renditions of how to compose in each process.

They invent and imitate versions of writing through drawing, spelling, and various uses of the page. Their words change from erratic placement on blank spaces and around drawings to more orderly lines reserved for the print. Children also share their versions of oral reading by imitating the intonation of others. They hold their book, "read," and share the pictures from a pseudo-author's chair when they are reading alone and they take part in impromptu sharing sessions during the reading period.

They imitate the appearance of writing when they invent the spellings for the words they want on the pages they write about their personal experiences. They imitate the appearance of reading when they invent their retelling of a story they have heard. They imitate the general processes and invent their own renditions.

In this phase the concept of authorship is a vague one. But they begin the long process of advancing toward a richer understanding of the concept by doing what writers and readers do: As writers they struggle to put their thoughts on paper and they talk about these thoughts with other writers. As readers they compose messages and ask questions about published stories. They play, they invent, they mimic when they compose in reading and writing and sitting on the Author's Chair.

Phase II: Transition Phase "I Am an Author"

The author concept follows the publishing cycle in the classroom. The first published book appears during the first week of school and by October many of the children have had their first writing published in hard cover. Whenever a child publishes a book he or she reads it to the class. Their books are displayed alongside those of the professional authors read to the class. The author concept begins to become real as more and more children publish books.

As the children take part in the publishing cycle from drawing, to writing, to the making of the book, and sharing it with the class, they begin to understand the chain of events that leads to authorship: "Cindy is an author. She just got her book published."

The children start to identify with professional authors when they become aware of the prominence of topic choice. They think about what they know and make a decision. Usually they write about personal experiences. Professional writers choose their own topics and these children do likewise. They look at the content of trade books with the assumption the author is relating personal experiences. After reading a book to the class, Ellen frequently asks, "How do you suppose the author chose this topic?" One day she had read a factual book about barber shops and the answer to her question was by now predictable, "Rockwell must have just been to the barber shop."

The children project more than experience to the professional writer. One day Don Graves was not at the research site and one of the children asked, "Where is Mr. Graves today?" Jane Hansen replied, "He is at home writing his book." "He's doing the same thing we are," the child said casually.

The children think they know authors as persons. For example, Bill Martin becomes an early favorite because of his collection at the listening center. His books are some of the first ones they learn to read: "I can read my own book and Bill Martin Junior's book about the brown bear."

During this phase the children gradually show greater precision in their use of print. Although art work in reading and drawings in writing are still important, the transition phase is marked by more interest in print. Their decoding and encoding skills mature so they view the information in the illustrations as an extension of the text, whereas in the inventive phase the drawing was of primary importance. Now

the child sees the print as a necessary adjunct to the drawing. Whereas the drawing (when writing) and the illustrations (when reading) were dominant in the inventive phase, now there is a more complementary connection between the two. In their published books they draw a picture for every thought they express in words. The child sees pictures and print as an organic whole, a necessary precursor to seeing the distinctive functions of each.

The reading and writing in this phase take on different forms. The writing becomes more internalized. There is less oral composing during writing; they can write some words without producing every sound orally. The reading process evidences itself in just the opposite way. More and more sounding is heard. When we ask the children what they do when they read and write in this phase the response is the same as in the inventive phase, "Sound out the letters," even though it is less true of what they do when they write and more true of what they do when they read. A further query produces a glimmer of their process awareness, "Some kids still memorize their books, but I sound out when I read."

Gradually, more of their attention shifts to broader units of involvement in the composing processes. Rereading may go back several words and even several sentences in order to decide which word comes next. When they write, they reread before almost each new word. When they read, they reread when the message is interrupted by sounding out a word. The children do an abundance of rereading as they strive to make meaning.

This context broadens because of the events around the Author's Chair. As they receive and question books their questions involve the information in the stories. They ask, "Why didn't you tell why you still love your sister? Why didn't the author explain the way the goat felt?" In short, as the time-space units expand with the process moving back and forth between current word and broader text, the child begins to develop a sense of option. And as the child develops a sense of option, the authorship concept for self, other children, and professional becomes more distinctive.

Phase III: Option-Awareness Phase

"If I Wrote This Published Book Now, I Wouldn't Write It This Way"

The children's books no longer end with, "I feel sad," or "I feel happy." They can understand stories when authors write implied messages. Although they still expect most information to be explicit they now portray the mood of a story in their overall message. They expect their readers to compose a message when they read. They start to do this on purpose. One day Susan was reading a draft to us, "Do you like gym?" As she read she inserted, "Yes," and explained to us, "I won't put 'yes' in the published book. The kids will have to say that when I read it."

And one day when Steven read a new published book to the class someone asked him why he hadn't included a certain piece of information, "I thought you could figure it out." It is unlikely Steven had made this conscious decision as he was composing, but he does know that this is an acceptable assumption. Authors have the option of leaving some of the composing up to the reader.

In time they also learn how to handle the option of fictitious information. Jessica has sat in the Author's Chair both as a reader of her own books and trade

books. She has heard different points of view about content and author's intentions from the other children. One day when she read her piece about the death of her grandfather, her book sounded like a first person account. Richie asked, "Is this a true story?" Jessica replied, "Some of it is not. Most of it is true." Richie continued, "Which parts are fake?" Jessica replied, "The part where I said I went to the funeral." At this point the teacher asked Jessica about her options, "Why did you put it in if it's not true?" Jessica asserted, "I thought it made the story better." The teacher wants to reveal Jessica's option, the right of any writer.

At this phase the children are wrestling with such polar issues as true-untrue, imaginary-real, and explicit-implicit. As each becomes more distinctive, children develop a sense of option in interchanging them in their writing and reading. They learn that child authors and professional authors have options.

Children also discover that authors publish different versions of one story. "Hey, look, here's the same story but the words are different. I wonder why the author published it both ways."

The sense of option becomes real to the children because of the changes in their own reading and writing processes and because of the Author's Chair. Children both exercise and experience the effects of audience. When they share their own pieces and view the reception of the works of both classmates and professionals, they recognize the variance of opinion. Ellen encourages children to provide information to back their opinions, "Why do you suppose the author rewrote this book and published it again?" "Because the first one was sad." As children experiment, adapt, change their opinions they become open to options during the reading and writing process.

In the previous phase children read more for fluency. They read in order to share their accurate reading of words. The effects of the story on the listener were not as important as an accurate rendition of the print and the sharing of illustrations. The children read the book or rewrote the piece until it was "just right." The children already knew what the message was going to be because in reading they almost always chose stories they had heard before and in writing they related incidents that had happened to them. They didn't read and write to find out the product. They read and wrote because the process of putting together an already known message intrigued them. Now, the children reread and rewrite for layered meanings.

The children reread not with the conscious view of going after different levels of comprehension. Rather, the children reread to reenjoy characters, plots, and actions. But in doing so the child gathers a sense of option about the interaction of various components of the story. New meanings appear in successive readings. In short, the child "revises" the content of the piece read.

The actual reading performance changes as well. The children go back and forth within the paragraph or story in order to juxtapose part-whole relationships in the whole piece.

The writing process also involves an exercise of option. The children reread with more than a view of reorienting themselves in their emerging texts. Now they reread with a view to making the part under construction consistent with the overall intention in the piece. The child discovers inconsistencies and will choose to cut

and paste for reorganization, choose to organize a story by chapter in order to make it more clear, or write a complete second draft that includes, "a lot more information." The child rewrites with a sense of what the class will ask when he or she reads the piece from the author's chair.

When children are asked about how they read and write, their answers now show more separation between the two processes, "When I write I choose a topic. That's the hard part. Then I write drafts. Then I might publish it. When I read I choose a story, sometimes I can read it without lots of practice, then I might read it to the class." In both reading and writing, the children have a sense of process and are especially free of the "sounding out" component so dominant in earlier statements. Such freedom lifts the children into more thinking about information and the content and organization of what authors actually do in writing.

The children do have options. They do make decisions. They decide whether to put information in their pieces or not. They defend their pieces when the class asks questions. They question published authors. They respond to a story by accepting it and asking questions. Their responsibility as a writer is to anticipate questions from readers. Their responsibility as a reader is to ask questions of authors. They become assertive readers who expect authors to defend the choices they made when they wrote.

Hypotheses About Authorship

We did not know where the 1981-82 year would take us. We certainly did not know the Author's Chair would come to symbolize the relationship between reading and writing. Somehow, readers who are also writers develop a sense of authorship that helps them in either composing process. The above observations lead us to the following hypotheses about the relationship between reading and writing as it develops in beginning readers.

1. Children's concept of author changes from a vague notion about some other person who writes books to the additional perception of themselves as authors to the realization that they have choices and decisions to make as authors.
2. Children's concept of authorship becomes more pronounced as their concepts of reading and writing become more differentiated.
3. Authorship concepts become more differentiated because children actively compose in both reading and writing. Composing in each of these processes consists of imitating and inventing during encoding, decoding, and the making of meaning.
4. Children change from imposing their own understandings of process and content upon authors, to realizing various authors can use process and content differently.
5. Children realize authors have options because they do the following in both the reading and writing processes: exercise topic choice, revise by choice, observe different types of composing, and become exposed to variant interpretations.

6. Children who learn to exercise options become more assertive in dealing with other authors. At first an author is distant, then an author is self, finally the self-author questions all authors and assertive readers emerge.

The data for this article came from the first year of our investigation of the relationship between reading and writing. We could not have gathered these data if we had not been in a classroom in which the children had ample opportunity to both read and write. Our recognition of the importance of the author concept came because of the uniqueness of our field site. Since the significance of the author concept did not emerge until the second half of the year, we have started a new year-long study with a new group of children to examine the author concept in greater depth.

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Witch's Child

Tell me a story
Said the witch's child
About a beast
So fierce and wild,
About a ghost
That moans and groans,
About a skeleton
That rattles its bones,
About a monster
So crawly and creepy,
Something nice to make me sleepy.

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